

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Safeguarding the People of Nagorno-Karabakh

Wednesday, June 21, 2023

2:15 – 4:00 p.m.

2360 Rayburn House Office Building

As prepared for delivery

As the Co-Chair for the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues, I would like to thank my long-time friend, Jim McGovern, and my fellow New Jerseyan, Chris Smith, for holding this important hearing today.

I would also like to thank our distinguished guests for their expert testimony that has helped shed light on the ongoing human rights abuses perpetrated against Armenians living in Artsakh.

This hearing is timely as we recently surpassed the six-month anniversary of Azerbaijan's ongoing blockade of the Lachin Corridor.

The blockade has caused severe shortages of food, medical supplies, drinking water, energy, and other essentials – creating a dire humanitarian crisis for the 120,000 people living in Artsakh.

As other members and witnesses have clearly stated, this is a man-made crisis purposefully created by the Aliyev regime to severely worsen the quality of life for the people of Artsakh.

Aliyev has not been subtle about alluding to the Armenian Genocide when discussing Artsakh and removing people from there, nor has he attempt to hide his ongoing deadly incursions into Armenian territory.

He is clearly taking premeditated steps to remove the indigenous Armenian population from Artsakh and deprive them of the opportunity to live freely, democratically, and with dignity in the land of their ancestors – a clear sign of ethnic cleansing that we must not ignore.

This follows the pattern set forth by the devastating, unprovoked war by Azeri forces in 2020 that destroyed civilian infrastructure, left thousands of people dead, and displaced tens of thousands more from their homeland.

Unfortunately, little was done to hold Azerbaijan accountable at the time, which is a pattern that has continued in the months and years that followed.

It's no wonder Aliyev felt he could get away with this blockade as the current international strategy to reopen the Lachin Corridor has been frustratingly similar to the post-2020 war strategy.

There is well-documented evidence of the blockade's tragic effect on innocent civilians, but Aliyev continues to lie to the international community by stating there is no blockade or downplaying what his regime is doing.

The many statements of disappointment and concern by international leaders have not halted Aliyev's deadly campaign in Artsakh nor his saber rattling at Armenia.

I think it's past time that the United States start better leveraging the diplomatic tools at our disposal, including sanctions, to finally bring this purposeful crisis to an end.

Our country has a critical role in bringing these aggressions and expansionist behaviors to an end by helping the innocent civilians of Artsakh to live in their lands without the constant fear of attack and supporting their aspirations of self-determination.

And as discussions between Armenia and Azerbaijan are reportedly set to resume here in Washington next week, I call on the Administration to take every action necessary to prevent Azerbaijan's militaristic behavior from dictating the terms of a final agreement, as that will not lead to an equitable, lasting peace in the region.

I also vow to continue working with Chairs Smith and McGovern, along with my Co-Chairs and colleagues on the Congressional Armenian Caucus, to ensure that we are holding the Aliyev regime accountable for the terrible human rights abuses they have committed.

Thank you again to everyone who helped put this important hearing on today. I yield back.